SENT
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Psalm 150
John 20:19–31

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
John 20:21b (NRSV)

The parts of the Christian story that had drawn me into the Church were not the believing parts but the beholding parts:

- "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy"
- "Behold, the Lamb of God"
- "Behold, I stand at the door and knock"

Christian faith seemed to depend on beholding things that were clearly beyond belief.
. . . I wanted out of the belief business and back into the beholding business.
I wanted to recover the kind of faith that has nothing to do with being sure what I believe and everything to do with trusting God to catch me though I am not sure of anything.

Barbara Brown Taylor
Leaving Church

On this, the Sunday after, remind us of why we are here on the first day of the week.
Startle us again with good and glad news of Easter, of a world and a future now different because your love has conquered death, in Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

It is known to insiders as "Low Sunday," the Sunday after Easter is. After the glorious crescendo of Easter morning, there is a tendency in many churches to experience the ecclesiastical equivalent of an exhausted collapse. Not here, happily. Our business, our mission in this place continues. So we send everybody home on Easter Monday, but by Tuesday morning the place is humming again. But typically the preacher takes a rest, perhaps the choir director too, from their labors. The flowers are wilted and discarded; the hats are gone, back in boxes and back on the

shelf; the music is a bit more subdued; and needless to say and most conspicuously of all, nobody needs overflow seating on the Sunday after Easter.

It is a very good day to ask a very important question: “What was the point of it all? Is there a point? Is Easter, with all its wonderful celebration, an end in itself, or does it lead somewhere?”

It is a question addressed in the text this morning. It was Easter evening. After the public execution of Jesus, his closest friends and followers did the prudent thing: went into hiding. Someone found a safe house in Jerusalem, a room big enough for all of them, a stout door with a strong bolt. They had been there, hiding in that room, since Friday afternoon. One of their number is not there as this little post-Easter story begins.

There they were, lying low, trying to be inconspicuous, waiting for the furor surrounding the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus to settle, afraid that if they were seen publicly they would be identified as his friends, arrested and crucified.

Earlier that day, before dawn, a few of the women had ventured out while it was still dark. They had gone to the tomb to anoint his body with spices and ointments and had returned breathless, almost hysterical, babbling something about the tomb being open, his body gone, angels and earthquakes. Mary claimed to have seen him and talked to him. The ones in the room dismissed it: an “idle tale,” they concluded.

And then, that evening something happened that none of them would ever forget, something that made all the difference in the world, something that challenged everything they thought they knew about life and death. Suddenly he was there, Jesus. Was it an apparition? Did they imagine it? Jesus came. And what he said was “Peace be with you.” He said it a second time so they wouldn’t miss the point: “Peace be with you.” And then he told them why he was there, why they were given this Easter experience: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The point here is to get these people out of that room. The point here is to give them enough peace, enough of his spirit—his life and breath—to get them up and moving again. The point here—the point of Easter—is to get frightened, discouraged men and women who are very much inclined to stay put, to stay in the room as long as necessary, to get them up and moving toward the door, toward the streets of the city, toward their homes and families and communities—toward, that is to say, life in this beautiful world now suddenly, dramatically, and profoundly different because Jesus has come to them and breathed on them and sent them.

But first, one of the company is missing. He's actually one of my favorites, Thomas. Frederick Buechner thinks Thomas just wanted some fresh air, wanted to get away from the heavy oppression of that locked room, that prison, so he's having a cup of coffee or sitting on a park bench feeding pigeons. I think he's grocery shopping. I'm always concerned about where the next meal is coming from. I worry about those people in that locked room: they're getting hungry. So I think Thomas, the practical, the dependable, the realist, is out buying food.

He's got a name that I don't like. He's known as Doubting Thomas. But he's really Realistic Thomas, Dependable Thomas, and I like the way he thinks. He's not there when Jesus appears and breathes on the disciples and sends them out. When he returns with the food, they try to tell him. They're all talking at once and they're sounding as hysterical and ridiculous as the women had earlier. "Unless I see it too—see the evidence, see the nail holes in his hands—I'm not believing it. No way." The late Raymond Brown, a wonderful New Testament scholar, observed that the Greek is extraordinarily emphatic here, something like, "I'll never believe it; do you think I'm crazy?"

I think Thomas is actually the patron saint of rational, skeptical, postmodern people like you and me. I think Thomas simply says what you and I would have said in that situation: "Show me."

He gets the title Doubting Thomas because we think that doubt is the opposite of faith, that having a religious faith means not having any doubts. Thomas is an important reminder that doubt is not only not incompatible with faith but is actually normal, natural, a part of faith.

Douglas John Hall, looking back on his very distinguished career as a teaching theologian, says that in our time religious faith has come to mean intellectual certainty. Christian faith has come to mean believing certain ideas about God and Jesus to be true. But faith, Hall and others are teaching, is more a matter of trusting God. Christian faith is more a matter of trusting Jesus Christ, following Jesus Christ, than believing ideas about Jesus Christ.

Bob Abernethy of PBS's *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* interviewed Barbara Brown Taylor about her book *Leaving Church*. Barbara left parish ministry to teach, and Abernethy asked her if doubt had played a role. She responded, "Here's the way I presently live with doubt. Doubt often brings me to poke at what I believe. And when it topples, I realize it was an idol. And so doubt has been a divine gift that has led me deeper into God."

Doubt was the catalyst for her that led to a deeper faith in God, faith as radical trust, faith, for her: literally getting up and walking out of the room.

Sister Joan Chittister describes her own vocation as author, lecturer, spiritual director in a book titled *Called to Question*. She explains how as a youngster she always doubted some of the absolute certainties she had been taught.

> I was an Irish Catholic child of a Roman Catholic mother and a Presbyterian stepfather. A 'mixed marriage' they called it euphemistically. What they meant was that we were right and he was wrong. We had the truth and he did not. We would go to heaven. He? Well, heaven for him, for them, for Protestants, was at best uncertain. Sad, I know, but true nevertheless. Except that down deep in me, even then, the justice of that statement went begging. (p.11)

Anne Lamott makes the same point in a vignette about a friend who was dying, and whose evangelical friends told her she should be happy to be going to be with Jesus. "This is the type of thing that gives Christians a bad name. That and the Inquisition," Lamott quips. Those same friends had told her that her Jewish nieces weren't going to heaven. Lamott writes, "I told her what I believe to be true—that there was not one chance in a million that those nieces wouldn't go to heaven, and if I was wrong, who would ever want to go. I promised that if there was any problem, she and I would refuse to go. We'd organize" (*Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, p. 269).

Wendell Berry argues that we need more doubt, not less; more questions, more skepticism in the public arena, particularly the political arena.

And on this topic I love what the poet Rilke wrote: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and learn to love the questions themselves" (see William Sloane Coffin, *The Courage to Love*, p. 7).

Faith is not having all questions answered, all your doubts resolved. Faith is not being paralyzed by your doubts. Faith is not the absence of doubt, but trusting God in spite of your doubt. Faith is not being afraid to question, to doubt. Faith is getting up and leaving the locked room and walking into the future unafraid.

By happy coincidence we chose the Sunday after Easter, Low Sunday, to ordain and install church officers. It's a little bulky and chaotic and it takes a lot of time, but we Presbyterians insist on doing it publicly, because at the very heart of our tradition is the belief that God calls each of us, not just clergy, but every one of us, to live a full and committed life following Jesus Christ. One of the distinctive characteristics of Presbyterianism is the notion that each of us has a God-given vocation—that God needs committed school teachers and social workers and lawyers, physicians and homemakers, preachers and plumbers and bankers, artists and athletes and

accountants. At the heart of our Presbyterian tradition is the belief that God calls each of us to a vocation of following Jesus Christ whatever we are doing with our lives. And so when we go to all the fuss of ordaining, gathering around our fellow church members, kneeling, laying hands on their heads and shoulders, we are saying that the hand of God rests on each and every one of us, that the Lord Jesus Christ says to each of us “Peace be with you” and “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The point here is to get the friends of Jesus up and moving toward the door, to get them out of that room. The point here, someone said, is for all others “crouched behind bolted doors, dismayed and upset, who have not yet heard or find it hard to believe that death is not the end” (Charles Cousar, in *Texts for Preaching*).

The word here to you and to me, then, is to get up and get going: to walk out of whatever place we are hiding, fearful perhaps, worried perhaps about the future, anxious about what will become of us, to get up and head to the door and to walk out into the bright light of day, following our Lord Jesus Christ as he goes before us.

It was one week later, Low Sunday. They are still in the room, and this time Thomas is there. Jesus comes again. “Peace be with you,” he says, and then to Thomas, “Put your finger here—see my hands. Reach out your hand.” And the most amazing thing: after all that, Thomas doesn’t do it, doesn’t touch the evidence his doubts demanded. Instead, a confession of faith and trust: “My Lord and my God.”

Who knows what happened in that room? I keep close at hand something the great Russian novelist Dostoevsky wrote:

> As far as I am concerned, I look upon myself as a child of the age, a child of unbelief and doubt: it is probable I shall remain so to my dying day. I have been tortured with longing to believe—am so, even now: and the yearning grows stronger, the more cogent the intellectual difficulties that stand in the way. And yet God sometimes sends me moments of complete serenity. It is in such moments that I have composed in my mind a profession of faith. (William Hamilton, “New Optimism” in *The Death of God*, Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton)

So Thomas and the others got up, headed toward the door, walked into the future and changed the world.

Thanks be to God.